

The Problems Faced by a Translator

• Dr. Muhammad Zaid Malik

ABSTRACT:

Translation is a separate genre and should be treated as one with its specific set of issues, nuances and problem. The Islamic scholars face a peculiar set of problems as their root-medium is Arabic and it is from Arabic to the other languages--- that conversion words a translators' main job are hard to find.

The following article is an effort to highlight the set of problems and issues faced by Muslim non-Arab translators while dealing with the medium of Arabic language.

INTRODUCTION:

The world in the 21st century has entered the new era of communication and information, and thus has undergone an enormous exchange of thought and knowledge. Human beings are now much more interested in having dialogues with each other. Procurement of knowledge has become easy even for an ordinary person. Hence, it has become easy to educate the minds, and illuminate the hearts of individuals in nearly all parts of the world.¹

If we try to look from the Islamic point of view, we will realize that the opportunity to have and impart the knowledge of Islam is increasing day by day. The whole world is feeling the need for inter-faith dialogue. There is an authentic Hadith in which the Prophet, peace and blessings of

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Allah be upon him said, 'The message of Islam will enter each and every house of the whole world, honoring some and humiliating some others.'²

The scholars of Islam have made it very clear to the people interested in acquiring knowledge of Islam that the understanding of the Qur'an, the Word of God and the understanding of *Sunna'h*, the practical demonstration of the Word of God, are the pre-requisites for the correct understanding of Islam.

To understand the both fundamental sources of Islam, the major problem that one faces is the knowledge of Arabic language. The Holy Qur'an and *Sunna'h* are in a highly classical and literary Arabic language.

About the Qur'an Allah the Almighty says: "And indeed We know that the Pagans say: It is only a human being who teaches Muhammad. The tongue of the man they refer to is foreign, while this Qur'an is in a clear Arabic tongue."³ While about the *Sunna'h* the Prophet (SAW) said: "I am the most eloquent among the whole Arabs, I was raised in Banū Sa'd, how can I make a grammatical mistake?"⁴

Allah the Almighty sent the Prophets and Messengers to those nations who knew the languages of these Prophets. 'And We sent not a Messenger except with the language of his people, in order that he might make the message clear for them.'⁵

It is also helpful in safeguarding one's interests if he knows the language of the people he/she is dealing with. 'Whoever knows the language of a nation, keeps himself safe from their tricks'.⁶

The work of translation started from early days of Islam. It flourished in the Abbasid era and then it is scattered here and there in different parts of the world particularly the sub-continent.

The Prophet (SAW) ordered Zaid bin Thabit to learn Hebrew and Syriak⁷ so that his letters should be translated to these languages before

being sent to the People of the Book, because he was afraid that the Jews or Christians might make some changes in his letters.⁸

The House of Wisdom:

The institutionalization of the translation work started during the Islamic Golden Age. The House of Wisdom (*Bāyt al-Hikma'h*) was a library and translation institute established in Abbasid-era in Baghdad, Iraq. It was a key institution in the Translation Movement and considered to have been a major intellectual center. The House of Wisdom was a society founded by Caliph Harūn al-Rashid and culminated under his son al-Ma'mūn, who reigned from 813–833 AD. Al-Ma'mūn is credited with bringing many well-known scholars to share information ideas and culture in the House of Wisdom. Based in Baghdad from the 9th to 13th centuries, many of the most learned Muslim scholars were part of this excellent research and educational institute. It had the dual purpose of translating books from other languages to Arabic and of the preservation of translated books.⁹

In the Abbasid Empire, many foreign works were translated into Arabic from Greek, Chinese, Sanskrit and many other languages like Persian. Large libraries were constructed, and scholars persecuted by the Byzantine Empire were welcomed.¹⁰

Under the sponsorship of caliph al-Ma'mūn the library was directed by the poet and astrologer Sahl ibn Harūn (d. 830); the other notable scholars associated with the library are Muhammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī (780–850), the Banū Mūsā brothers (Mohammed Jāfar ibn Mūsā, Ahmad ibn Mūsā, and al-Hasān ibn Mūsā), Sind ibn Ali and Yaqūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindi (801–873).

Christian scholar Hunayn ibn Ishāq (809–873) was placed in charge of the translation work by the caliph. The most renowned translator was the Sabian Thābit ibn Qurra (826–901).¹¹

Destruction by the Mongols:

Along with all other libraries in Baghdad, the House of Wisdom was destroyed during the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258. Nāsir al-Din al-Tūsī rescued about 400,000 manuscripts which he took to Maragh'eh before the siege.¹²

After this decline in the translation work in the Abbasid era there is another great movement of translation in the Muslim Spain until the fall of Grenada in 1492 AD, when most of the scientific works of the Muslims were translated into latin by the Christian and Jewish scholars. Then there is a long pause in the institutionalized translation work except for the personal efforts by some scholars.

Dar al-Taleef wa al-Tarjama:

In the sub-continent the Osmania University of Hyderabad, India, founded in 1908, is one of the oldest modern universities in India that started the translation work as a movement. Dār al-Taleef wa al-Tarjama'h (Center for Authorship and Translation) was established. Committees were formed to translate books, coin terms, consult scholars regarding translation and terms, select books for the syllabus, revise and review translated books, review the books from a religious perspective, and review the translated books from a literary viewpoint. Selected books in English, French, German, Arabic, and Persian were translated into Urdu, with publication beginning in 1919. At least 84 books related to different topics were translated into Urdu.¹³

Maulvi Abdul Haq, known as Baba-e-Urdu (Father of Urdu) was also the moving spirit behind the establishment of Usmania University.

The textbooks and reference material to be used here were translated and compiled under his supervision. After his retirement in 1930, he compiled and edited a comprehensive and authoritative English-Urdu dictionary.

The National Language Authority:

The National Language Authority (*Muqtadra Qaumi Zaban*) is another organized effort to promote the translation work in Pakistan. It was initially established in 1979 to support the advancement and promotion of Urdu, which is the national language of Pakistan. However, with the passage of time, it expanded its horizons to include standardization and linguistic aspects such as orthography and lexicography. It also provides recommendations for maximizing the use of Urdu language in all occupations. In this respect, large amounts of legal and scientific documents are translated from English and other languages for publication into Urdu. The organizational structure consists of six divisions that include: Dictionary section (*Darul Lughaat*), Translations section (*Darul Tarjuma*), Literature section (*Darul Tasneef*), and Publications section (*Darul Isha'at*) respectively.¹⁴ There is also a Center of Excellence for Urdu Informatics to carry out research in developing the suitable hardware and software for the use of language in electronic media. A dedicated library contains extensive resources on Urdu, and issues regular Urdu Bulletins.¹⁵

Definition of Translation:

Knowing more than one language is like having more than five senses. It helps a person to see the world in a bigger picture than his regional and limited world. So to keep up with the fast pace of the modern world that has shrunk now into a village like entity, we have to know more than one language.¹⁶

If we are unable to learn a foreign language then the option for translation is always open.

'Translation is the art of transferring the thoughts and meanings from one language to another'. So the translation is like a bridge between the cultures that helps in continuation of cultural development. The art of translation has grown very important among the developed nations. They value the translation work from and to their language and spend tremendous amount of money on it from their fiscal budget.

It is with the Grace of Allah that now in the Muslim world; both Arab and non-Arab, a new wave of renaissance is being seen and the people are paying attention to all means of gaining knowledge, and translation from and to Arabic is one of those means.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan are on top of the Arab countries that are very much concerned with the field of translation, printing and publishing the translated books and holding international conferences on the topic of translation.

The translations that I have seen until now were mostly from Arabic to Urdu language and very few were from Urdu to Arabic language. The reason for this phenomenon is the principle, which says that the translator must be stronger in the language to which the material is being transferred than the language from which the translation is being done. Now the majority of the translators I found were from Pakistan and India, the Urdu speakers. Certainly, the majority of these translators were those whose Urdu language was stronger than Arabic.

The Translation Project of *Nadrat al-Na'eem*:

'*Nadrat al-Na'eem Makarimu Akhlāq al-Rasól al-Kareem Şallallahu Álaihi wa Sallam*' is an encyclopedia of the good etiquettes that

were commanded and the bad etiquettes that were prohibited in the holy Qur'an and in the Prophetic traditions. A twelve volume book (*Nadrat al-Na'eem*), whose each volume is about 500-600 pages, speaks about firstly the good etiquettes and then the bad etiquettes in alphabetical order. The book was originally written by a group of scholars under the supervision of the Imam of the Holy Ka'bah al-Shaikh Salih bin Abdullah bin Humaid and published by al-Wasīlah Publishing and Distributing Company in Jeddah, under the supervision of its owner Abdurrahman bin Mallouh.

This encyclopedia is translated from its original language Arabic to Urdu by Dr. Muhammad Zaid Malik (myself) and his team of translators.

Regarding the method used in the encyclopedia, it starts with listing all the Qur'an verses that have come under that particular quality. For example if we take the quality of '*Taqwā*' (under letter 'Taa'), the verses of the holy Qur'an about *Taqwā* will be mentioned first, then all the authentic *Ahādith* that talk about *Taqwā* will be listed. After that those *Ahādith* will be mentioned that reveal the meanings of *Taqwā* in them, i.e., the word '*Taqwā*' might not be used in them necessarily. After that, the practical example on *Taqwā* from the life of the holy Prophet is mentioned and then the sayings of *Ṣahāba'h* and *Tabi'een* on '*Taqwā*' are narrated. Finally, the benefits earned from this quality are listed. The same pattern is followed while writing about the bad qualities also.

Problems faced by a Translator while undertaking the Task of Translation:

There are many problems that a translator faces and has to overcome them. Some of these important problems are as under:

- 1- Lack of Expertise: There are some pre-requisites to the task of translation that must be fulfilled by a translator.

- a. He/she has to excel in the languages he/she is translating from and translating to. It is better that the translator should be stronger in the language to which the material is being transferred than the language from which the translation is being done, as the writing in a particular language is more difficult than the understanding of the material that is read. The scholars have arranged the linguistic abilities in four categories regarding the element of difficulty:
 - i. Understanding of that which is heard,
 - ii. Understanding of that which is read,
 - iii. Speaking, and finally
 - iv. Writing which is considered the most difficult level, so much so that even those who are native speakers of a language are sometimes unable to write in it, particularly if it is literary writing.
 - b. The translator should know the field in which he/she is going to translate, as every field of science and arts has its own vocabulary, linguistic formations and special style. There could be some special academies that may train the translators in this aspect. International Islamic University, Islamabad has a special department in the Faculty of Arabic that takes care of this aspect. But still many more institutions like this are needed in Pakistan and the other Muslim countries.
- 2- Lack of good dictionaries needed by the translators. And this need is increasing day by day in Pakistan, as we don't have a proper market where good Arabic dictionaries are easily available. The dictionaries like *al-Māwrid* by Munir Ba'albaki, *al-Qāmūs al-Asri* (Modern Dictionary) by Elias A. Elias and *A Dictionary Of*

Modern Written Arabic by Hans Wehr, are rarely seen in Pakistani book shops.

- 3- Lack of care, concern and interest shown towards the translation and the translators, from the authorities and consequently from the public also. The reader when purchases a translated book does not look for the translator's name, rather he/she looks for the name of original author. In spite of the seminars and conferences, which has made translation one of its main themes, the work of the translator is still not appreciated and valued; neither materially nor morally. I have personally tried to establish myself in the translation business but due to this reason, my intentions and plans kept on breaking repeatedly.
- 4- Lack of coordination between the translation centers and authorities, which makes it difficult to know which of the good books have already been translated. The encyclopedia of '*Nadrat al-Na'eem Makarimu Akhlāq al-Rasūl al-Kareem Ṭallallāhu Alaihi wa Sallam*', that was translated by me and my team went through the same experience. We started this translation in 1996 and finished it in 1999. Eleven years later, in 2010, I received a telephone call from Karachi, a man was telling me that he is interested in translating this encyclopedia. He told me that he had already translated one volume when a friend of my late father (Dr. Ghulām Murtaḍā Malik) told him that Dr. Zaid Malik (myself) has already done this translation in Lahore, eleven years ago, and he gave that man my mobile number. So I felt sorry for him for the repetition of efforts and wastage of time and money that were due to lack of coordination among us. A repetition in a translation work

is appreciated if it is done in a way that is better than the previous one.

- 5- Dr. Bashir al-Isāwi thinks that one of the biggest problems in translation is the translation repeatedly done for the same text. Sometimes one text is translated up to ten times.¹⁷ But I do not agree with him on this opinion because a translator in my opinion is also a writer, and there is no harm reading several books or several writers on one particular topic. There could be another reason validating my opinion and that is the accuracy of the translations themselves. Some of the translations could be weak while others could be more accurate and expressing the original ideas and thoughts of the author in a more befitting manner. I remember that few years back I started reading the Urdu translation of 'Hujjatullah al-Balighah', the famous masterpiece of Shah Wali Allah al-Dahlawi. I could hardly reach ten pages when I realized that I am unable to comprehend the translation. It was very difficult, although it was in Urdu, my language. Finally I decided to read it in its original language; Arabic. Its Arabic was also difficult but easier than its Urdu translation.
- 6- Low level of Arabic language among the translators. Mere knowledge of two languages does not qualify a person to be a translator. A translator should excel in knowing both languages (particularly the one he is translating to), before undertaking the task of translation.

Qualities of a Good and Successful Translator:

For a person to be a good translator he/she needs several qualities; some of them are as under:

- 1- He should always aim high and try his best to gain expertise in the language he is going to translate to. As I said that the translation is an art, and I believe it is a difficult art. It becomes more difficult, when it involves two as diametrically opposite and unrelated languages as Arabic and Urdu. It is true that both the languages in question have their basic grammars and rules of syntax, but then these rules are so differently applied that one can be simply lost in their intricacies.

Dr. Qābil Khan, while making a good comparison between Pashto (language spoken in Pakistan and Afghanistan) and English says that ‘the structures of these two languages happen to be so bewilderingly different that in many places one would never know where to begin and where to end.’¹⁸

I think the same is true about Arabic and Urdu. So a successful translator takes care of these delicacies.

2. Apart from their peculiar grammatical structures, the two languages also have their distinctive idioms, proverbs and epigrams over and above the metaphorical and symbolical expressions, which are also the flesh and bones of literature. It is in this area that a translator is faced with even greater difficulty, for most of the idioms, proverbs and epigrams etc. of the two languages are simply untranslatable.

Here the translator has to be very careful and try to find an idiom or proverb identical in meaning from the other language, instead of trying to translate the idiom or proverb itself.

- 2- Most of these special linguistic features have special use and significance in the text, with sometimes the whole effect of the context hinging upon their use. Dr. Qābil Khan says that when this effect is lost in translation everything appears to have been lost.¹⁹

Real Challenge that a Translator has to face while Translating:

I think that the real challenge that a translator has to face while translating is the difference of cultures and civilizations that the peoples of any two languages have between them. Sometimes the two languages reflect two different cultures and civilizations. Their literatures being necessarily tied to these cultural contexts makes it highly confusing and difficult if not impossible to mold it into the idiom of the other. What may sound proper or appear perfectly all right in one language may sound simply silly or unacceptable in the other. Here the translator is faced with the difficulty of avoiding expressions, which may appear not only meaningless but outright senseless and unacceptable.²⁰

So in the words of Dr. Qābil Khan, there can be absolutely no question of what is called word by word translation from Pashto into English (or from Arabic into Urdu and vice versa). Most often, for the purposes of translation, a whole passage or a paragraph has to be read and then simply rewritten, as it were into the other language, sometimes ignoring many phrases or even clauses and inserting one's own necessary grammatical features and requirements not provided by the first language. In this way, only the gist would be translated, leaving aside so much of the outward form.²¹

Yes, if it is the Holy Qur'an or the *Ahādith* of the holy Prophet, peace be upon him, then it becomes difficult to move so freely while

translating the same. Although, al-Imām al-Maudūdī allows that freedom also. He says while writing the preface of his Tafsīr ‘Tafheem al-Qur’an’ “I have used the style of free translation instead of word to word translation in this Tafsīr. It is not because I do not approve the word to word or literal translation of the Holy Qur’an. The reason is that this type of translation has been done by several scholars before me. In Persian the translation of Shāh Waliullah, in Urdu the translations of Shah Abd al-Qadir, Shah Rafi al-Din, Maulanā Mahmood al-Hasan, Maulana Asharaf Ali al-Thānwi and Hafiz Fateh Muhammad Jālundhari are sufficient to fulfill this gap. Hence, there is no need to proceed further in this type of translations. But still there are some gaps that cannot be fulfilled by word-to-word or literal translations; I have in this translation tried to fulfill that gap. I tried to translate the meanings of the Qur’an; the spirit that these meanings contain.”²²

While translating the Sahīh of Imām al-Bukhārī into English, Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan follows the opposite way adopted by Imam al-Maudādī. He thinks that instead of translating freely the sayings of our beloved Prophet, we should mention the word as it is and then explains it between the parenthesis and brackets.

‘Due to non-existence of appropriate and equivalent English words for many Arabic words, those words have been transliterated and explanation has been given after each word immediately when it occurs for the first time and a glossary of such words has been compiled at the beginning of each volume. Certain religious formulas and invocations are transliterated. The Arabic script is kept as it is for such expressions as ‘Ta’ala’ (the most High), ‘Sallallahu Alaihi wa Sallam’ (peace be upon him), and ‘Radhi Allahu anhu’ (Allah be pleased with him) etc.’²³

One reality that must be kept in mind is that the impact or effect that one gets by reading any piece of literature can never be achieved by just reading the translation.

Shelly and Keats will never be understood in Urdu. Mir Taqi Mir, Mirzā Asadullah Khan Ghalib and Dr. Muhammad Iqbal will never be understood in English. No one disagrees. Yet many people are in the fallacy that the Qur'an can be understood – if not fully, then to a satisfactory degree – in languages other than Arabic.²⁴

Suggestions:

- 1- It is the need of the hour that there should be unified centers for translation, well-connected with institutions of higher education in the world. These centers should also take the responsibility to inform the public through a quarterly publication about the new translations of the books that took place recently.
- 2- Training of the translators in the above-mentioned centers to prepare them in doing good and authentic translation work. The training could be divided according to the various fields of science and arts. There could be short or long courses for translation. Although many Arab countries have established good centers for translation, Jordan being on top of the list, but as there is no coordination among these centers, I can only give two models that can be followed in my humble opinion. Both are universities in Islamabad; the capital of Pakistan. First is International Islamic University, Islamabad (IIUI), whose Faculty of Arabic is running the Department of Translation and Interpretation. The department is headed by Dr. In 'am al-Haq Ghazi. I interviewed him regarding the activities of his department and he told me that the department is offering a

four-year degree program called B.S. Translation and Interpretation. Until now, two languages are taught; Arabic and English. Very soon two more languages will be included, i.e. Urdu and Chinese, because it is the international requirement that a certified translator should know at least three languages.²⁵ The second model is National University of Modern Languages (NUML). It has a variety of programs that cannot be counted here. I can just narrate my interview with the Dean Faculty of Arabic, Dr. Ali Anwar who told me that the faculty is running many courses in the field of translation. It starts with Certificate Course of six months, then a higher level course that is Diploma in Interpretation; it is for six months also, then the faculty has a higher course for one and a half year which is a degree in translation. There is another course called Graduation in Interpretation with is a four-year degree program. This course is run with very systematic coordination between the Faculty of Arabic and the Faculty of English languages. The student is given degree called 'Bachelor in Arts of Modern Languages' (BAML), if his/her background is in Arts or 'Bachelor in Science of Modern Languages' (BSML), if he/she is coming from science background.²⁶

- 3- Encouragement of the translation work at the government level through moral and material means so that it may get the status of an industry.

Conclusion:

The translation is a creative process particularly when it involves literature. The good translator, like an artist, should capture and convey the

spirit of the text and should not care for its physical features or the outward form.

It is like chiseling a stone for a statue or painting a canvas for a portrait by the artist. The translator ignores the stone chips or the color pigments. What he aims at is the finished product and not the various ingredients going into making of it, without, of course, tampering with the spirit of the statue or the portrait; without shaping, reshaping, twisting or distorting it beyond recognition. The original image is absolutely left intact as visualized by the author or sanctioned by the culture behind it. In this way even in translation, it holds its uniqueness. So therefore, it is believed that a good translator should capture and synchronize the artistic perceptions and appreciations of two different languages and the two different cultures that they may represent.

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- ². It is a Hadith in *Musnad Ahmad* that reads ‘ layablughanna hazal amra ma balagha allailu wannahar wa la yatruckullahu baita madarin wa la wabarin illah adkhalahullahu hazaddin bi izzi aziz aw bi zulli zalil izzan uizzullahu bihi al-islam wa zullan uzillullahu bihi al-kufr.’ *Musnad Ahmad* (Beirut: Dar Sadir), Vol. 4, p 10 and Vol. 6, p 4.
- ³. Al-Qur’an, 16: 103.
- ⁴. Tabarani, on the authority of Abu Saeed al-Khudri, p. 181.
- ⁵. Al-Qur’an, 14: 4.
- ⁶. It is an Arabic proverb and not a Hadith.
- ⁷. Aramaic has become what some linguists call Syriac or Assyrian today, since it is the modern version of Aramaic. Still, it is the direct descendant of the language spoken by Jesus. See for detail:

http://www.alphadictionary.com/articles/language_of_jesus.html

- ⁸. For full text of the *Hadith*, see Tirmidhi, (Editted by al-Albani), *Sahih Sunan al-Timridhi. Vol.3* (Riyadh: Maktaba al-Ma'arif, 2002), p 85.
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- ²⁰. Ibid, p 14.
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- ²⁴. Qazi Ashfaq Ahmad, Dr. *How Best To Study The Qur'an* (Bangalore: Iqra Welfare Trust, 2008), p 63.
- ²⁵. This interview took place on 26-3-2011, through a telephonic conversation.
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